DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 780 HE 017 503

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TITLE Examination of Adult Student Participation: Is the Conventional Wisdom Confirmed? AIR Annual 1984 Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (24th, Fort Worth, TX, May 6-9, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Students; *College Attendance; College Choice; *Credit Courses; Higher Education; Institutional Research; *Noncredit Courses; *Part Time Students; School Holding Power; Student Recruitment
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum

ABSTRACT

The theory that a trajectory of adult student participation exists in college was tested in a multi-institution setting. The theory posits that the typical flow would begin with noncredit enrollment and culminate in matriculation. The study was conducted at a suburban community education center serving as the host site for credit courses from a small private college, a large private university, the local community college, and a public comprehensive college. A total of 362 part-time students from all four institutions and from the noncredit courses offered at the center were surveyed. The results refute the trajectory theory and indicate there are different participation patterns for noncredit, credit degree, and credit nondegree students and very little crossover from noncredit to credit. The total population exhibited a high degree of institutional loyalty, with credit nondegree students being the most likely to study from more than one institution. Credit degree students were the most active participants over time, and noncredit and credit nondegree students showed similar participation rates with the highest percentages being low participants. It is suggested that either specific curricular plans should be developed and evaluated to initiate a trajectory or else that these markets should be targeted separately. (SW)

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Examination of Adult Student Participation: Is the Conventional Wisdom Confirmed?

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Fourth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Hyatt-Regency in Fort Worth, Texas, May 6-9, 1984. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

Daniel R. Coleman, Chairman
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Abstract

There has been a prevailing, and untested, theory that a trajectory of adult student participation exists. The typical flow would begin with non-credit enrollment and culminate in matriculation. This study specifically examines this theory in a multi-institution setting and examines the linkage between credit and non-credit participation. The results refute the trajectory theory and indicate little relationship between non-credit and credit course patterns. Either specific curricular plans should be developed and evaluated to initiate a trajectory or else these markets should be targeted separately.

Examination of Adult Student Participation: Is the Conventional Wisdom Confirmed?

Introduction

Demographic shifts, technological revolution and economic upheaval are having an impact on American higher education. With enrollment data serving as the base for resource allocation and planning, college administrators are aggressively seeking ways to offset the predictable decline of traditional, full-time students. The graying of American college campuses is obvious to even the casual observer and increasing adult enrollment seems to be the most promising way to offset the enrollment declines resulting from this decrease in adolescents. The increase in participation of adults in college programs in the last decade is enticing, even more so when one realizes that the increase in adult learners represents only a small fraction of the potential market (Cross, 1981). Continuing education administrators are finding that the pressure to increase the enrollment of adults in credit courses, thus adding precious FTEs to bolster budgets, is intense. One popular strategy is to attempt to draw current continuing education non-credit course participants into regular, college credit courses.

Conventional wisdom holds that potential re-entry students, fearing tests, grades and other academic accoutrements, enroll in non-credit courses to test the academic waters. Successful experiences supposedly encourage later enrollment in credit courses and finally matriculation in a degree program. Non-credit continuing education is growing faster than any other area in higher education, (Cross, 1981, p. 37) having increased by 220 percent in the decade

between 1970 and 1980 (New York State Education department, 1983). So, the population of non-credit participants could be a veritable gold mine for colleges and universities if these adults are, in fact, learners actually "testing the academic waters."

Literature Review

The increase in adult students in higher education since the late 1960s has spawned interest in research on re-entry students (see, for example, Astin, 1976; Bielby, 1981; Lyman-Viera and Boggs, 1976; May, 1977). This growing body of literature emphasizes the need for and use of supportive services during the transitional period of re-entry and the impact on lifestyle, self-concept and interpersonal relationships of the re-entry students. Frequently, Continuing Education personnel request support for non-credit programming based on the "theory" that non-credit participants will eventually enroll in credit programs. This idea has been accepted largely as a matter of faith since a review of the literature demonstrates that participation research has not shown any relationships between credit and non-credit courses. The few longitudinal studies which have been conducted focus on patterns of and reasons for attrition in degree programs (Losty and Broderson, 1980; Mardian, 1981) with no attention to participation in non-credit courses. In a 1980 study, "Adult Students' Pace Toward Graduation", Mishler, Frederick, Hogan and Woody examined 180 transcripts of adults who graduated from the University of Wisconsin campuses at Green Bay and at Madison. They found that of the adults who returned to college and graduated, few began as non-degree special students taking a single course. But again, this study did not specifically address the portion of the trajectory "theory"

which indicates that adult re-entry students begin by taking non-credit courses and then enroll in credit courses, finally matriculating in a degree program.

Adult education participation research tends to focus on learners in specified settings (e.g., recreational programs, graduate courses, workshops, etc.), thus, the relationship between learning experiences organized within credit or non-credit institutional frameworks is ignored. Mocker and Spear (1982) present a conceptual framework of types of learning experiences based on locus of control. Formal, non-formal and informal learning within this framework could all include both credit and non-credit instruction, but again, participation patterns within and among these institutionally different modes of delivery are not explored. However, as resources become more precious, we need to explore and to define the relationships between credit and non-credit participation.

Purpose

This lack of research on similarities, differences and relationships between credit and non-credit participation leaves enrollment managers operating in a void regarding this potential market. It has allowed the conventional wisdom about participation patterns to go unchallenged. As described in "Participation Patterns in Credit and Non-Credit Courses" (Campbell, Hentschel, Rossi, and Spiro, 1984) upon which this paper is based, the purpose of this initial study was to begin to examine the conventional wisdom by describing the participation patterns of adults in credit and non-credit courses at a variety of institutions. Questions specifically addressed were:

1. Do adult students exhibit loyalty to provider institutions, i.e., do they continue to enroll at the same institution over a period of time?

2. Do adult students follow a trajectory pattern or path from non-credit courses to matriculation, i.e., does non-credit enrollment typically precede credit enrollment?

3. Is participation rate related to credit or non-credit participation?

Data Sources

The data for this study were provided by a four-page survey instrument designed by the researchers, specifically for a multi-institution continuing education population. It included demographic information such as sex, age category, family status, occupation and educational background. The heart of the survey consisted of historical and present course information. Information obtained for previous and current courses included the number of courses taken, titles, credit or non-credit status, reasons for taking the courses and the institution from which each course was taken. Respondents were asked whether the very first continuing education course they had taken had been credit or non-credit and through which institution it had been offered. Factors influencing enrollment and future educational plans were also covered.

Methodology

The study was conducted at a suburban community education center which served as the host site for credit courses from a small private college, a large private university, the local community college and a public comprehensive college. Students from all four institutions were surveyed as well as students from the non-credit courses offered by the school district operating the center. Instructors from the five institutions administered and collected the instrument during all classes meeting on a selected Tuesday evening. A Tuesday evening sample was chosen based on several known factors: the highest number of courses for both credit (14) and non-credit (61) was offered on Tuesday evening; every institution involved with the survey offered courses on Tuesday evening; and the types of courses offered on Tuesday were fairly representative of courses offered on the other three nights; (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). Thus, the design itself controlled for participation variables associated with location and timing.

Table 1

Frequencies for All Courses by Institution

Non-Credit Courses	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Total
Public School District	51	61	38	55	205
Credit Courses					
Public Comprehensive College	2	3	1	1	7
Public Community College	8	8	8	8	32
Large Private University	1	2	1	1	5
Small Private College	1	1	-	-	2
Total Courses	63	75	48	65	251

Table 2

Total Frequencies for Public School District

Non-Credit Courses	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Total
Accounting/Business/ Secretarial/Finance	5	6	5	7	23
Art	5	5	5	6	21
Aviation	1	2	-	-	3
Cards	-	2	-	1	3
Citizenship	-	1	-	-	1
Clownology	1	-	-	-	1
Computer Science	3	3	1	3	10
Dance	2	5	-	2	9
Driving	1	1	-	-	2
English	2	2	-	1	5
Futuring	-	1	-	-	1
Gardening	1	-	-	-	1
Geneology	-	1	-	-	1
Handyman Courses	4	3	2	3	12
Health	2	-	1	1	4
High School Equivalency	1	1	1	1	4
Home Economics	6	8	7	3	24
Language	2	5	3	7	17
Math	2	-	-	-	2
Music	2	1	1	3	7
Pets	-	-	-	2	2
Physical Fitness	8	13	10	8	39
Psychology	1	1	1	4	7
Radio Broadcasting	1	-	-	-	1
Reading	1	-	-	-	1
Sociology	-	-	-	3	3
Weather	-	-	1	-	1
TOTAL	51	61	38	55	205

Table 3

Total Frequencies for Credit Courses

Course	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Total
Accounting	3	1	3	1	8
Business	2	2	2	1	7
Computer Science	-	1	-	-	1
Curriculum & Instruction	-	1	-	-	1
Economics	-	1	1	1	3
Educational Administration	-	1	-	-	1
English	1	2	1	3	7
Geology	1	-	-	-	1
History	-	1	-	-	1
Management	-	1	-	-	1
Marketing	2	-	-	-	2
Math	-	2	-	3	5
Psychology	3	1	1	1	6
Sociology	-	-	1	-	1
Speech	-	-	1	-	1
TOTAL	12	14	10	10	46

Full-time students were eliminated from the study so that results would focus on part-time continuing education students; this yielded a sample of 362. Frequency and crosstabulation analysis were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Program on the Burroughs 6800. Frequencies were obtained for all variables. Several composite variables were created to enable meaningful crosstabulation analysis of relationships such as:

1. Institutional loyalty in relation to the history of previous courses, (Loyalty).

2. Institutional loyalty in relation to current status, i.e., degree seekers, non-degree credit enrollees, and non-credit enrollees, (Loyalty).

3. The number of continuing education courses taken in relation to the type of courses (non-credit or credit) taken, (Non-Credit/Credit Patterns).

4. The types of courses previously taken in relation to current status, (Participation Rates).

Historical usage rates were obtained by totaling the number of credit and non-credit courses taken during each period and obtaining a mean value. Usage ranges were developed to enable classification of users as low (1.6 or fewer courses per year), medium (1.7-3.5 courses per year) and high (more than 3.6 courses per year).

Institutional loyalty was determined by comparing the institution in which the student was currently enrolled with the type of course and institutional location of the first continuing education course.

Historical loyalty was determined by comparing the current institution with all courses and institutions previously identified. If courses were taken only at the current institution, those students were considered very loyal. Others were divided into two groups: those taking only one course at another institution, and those taking more than one course at other institutions.

Results

The 362 respondents represented a diverse population, with 66 percent female and 33 percent male (1% no response); 66 percent were married and 34 percent single. The age ranged from 17 to over 61 with 61 percent between the ages of 22 and 40. Over 45% had completed some kind of postsecondary degree; 52

percent reported a high school diploma as their highest degree. A wide range of occupations were represented: 20 percent were secretaries; 14 percent, professionals; 13 percent, homemakers. Sales personnel, technical personnel, educators, laborers, administrators and the composite of all other occupations each ranged from 6-10 percent of the total sample. All institutions were represented in the sample and 35 percent of the courses were taken for credit, 65 percent for non-credit. Of the total sample, 22 percent were pursuing a degree, 13 percent were taking credit courses but not pursuing a degree. Only one respondent reported taking both credit and non-credit courses simultaneously; this questionnaire was eliminated from further analysis because of its uniqueness. The students were largely experienced continuing education students, with 67 percent reporting that they had taken previous continuing education courses.

The reasons students were enrolled in the courses (Table 4) is consistent with trends reported in the general literature (Cross, 1981); 56 percent indicated job/career related reasons; 34 percent indicated personal reasons; 22 percent, hobby/recreational interests. Since multiple responses were acceptable in answering the question concerning reasons for enrolling, total percentages are greater than 100%. Further analysis of credit degree (n=80), credit non-degree (n=46), and non-credit (n=235) students shows that the non-credit participants had the most diverse motivations and the highest percentages in personal reasons, and were virtually the only group enrolled for hobby/recreational purposes. Even so, 51 percent reported motivations related to job/career concerns, a total percentage very similar to the credit degree students (52 percent) though distributed quite differently among the four alternatives

provided. The credit non-degree students were the most job-oriented learners (89 percent) with certification/licensure requirements motivating 52 percent of that population. Only five individuals (2 percent) reported that they were taking a non-credit course to advance toward a degree; seven people (3 percent) indicated this non-credit course was being taken on an introductory, trial basis.

Table 4

Reasons for Enrolling in Current Continuing Education Course(1)

	Total Sample (n=361)	Credit Degree (n=60)	Credit Non-Degree (n=46)	Non-Credit (n=235)
Advancement toward a degree	24%	100%	-	2%
Job Related				
Certification/Licensure	13%	5%	52%	8%
Job Skills Refresher	12%	3%	11%	16%
Career Advancement	22%	36%	22%	17%
Career Change	9%	8%	4%	10%
Job Related Total	56%	52%	89%	51%
Personal				
Personal Growth	27%	24%	13%	32%
Other Personal Reasons	7%	-	4%	10%
Personal Total	34%	24%	17%	42%
Hobby/Recreation	22%	-	2%	33%
Introductory/trial basis	2%	-	-	3%
Other	2%	-	-	-

(1)Totals for all categories are more than 100% because multiple reasons were possible.

Loyalty

When asked to identify the continuing education courses they had taken in the past, the respondents reported a high degree of institutional loyalty in their participation patterns. Of the total sample, 72 percent reported taking courses only from the institution where they were currently enrolled over a period of more than 3 years; 14 percent had taken only one course at another institution, and 14 percent had taken more than one course at other institutions.

Analysis of loyalty and user status, using the data on the students' first reported continuing education class, gives a more complex answer to the question of institutional loyalty; (see Table 5). Credit degree students were the most loyal, with 55 percent of the respondents indicating that their first continuing education course was a credit course from the same institution. Non-credit students had taken 50 percent of their first courses from the current institution--41 percent for non-credit and 9 percent for credit. The credit non-degree students were the least loyal (and, with 41 percent not responding, they perhaps had the least trustworthy memories!). Only 13 percent had taken their first continuing education course for credit from the current institution, while 43 percent had studied elsewhere first--30 percent for credit and 13 percent for non-credit.

Table 5

First Continuing Education Course Type and Institution

User Category	Credit Current Inst.	Credit Other Inst.	Non-credit Current Inst.	Non-credit Other Inst.	No Response
Credit Degree (n=80)	55%	21%	1%	9%	14%
Credit Non-Degree (n=46)	13%	30%	2%	13%	41%
Non-Credit (n=235)	9%	11%	41%	6%	34%

Non-credit/credit patterns

The data show little evidence of a typical pattern of credit enrollment preceded by non-credit enrollment, thus contradicting the conventional wisdom. Table 5 shows that only 10 percent (n=8) of the current credit degree students and 15 percent of the credit non-degree students (n=7) had enrolled in a non-credit Continuing Education course as their first experience. On the other hand, 76 percent (n=60) of the credit degree students and 43 percent (n=20) of the credit non-degree students had first selected credit courses.

Participation rates

Crosstabulation analysis of current user status and historical use shows that credit degree students are the most active participants, with 44 percent of the respondents reporting a mean of more than 3.5 credit courses per year.

Non-credit students and credit non-degree students showed similar participation rates with the largest percentages being low users taking 1.6 or fewer courses per year; (see Table 6).

Table 6

Participation Rates in Credit and Non-Credit Courses

	Credit Degree Students	Credit Non-degree Students	Non-credit Students
Low Usage (0-1.6/year)	16% credit only	30% credit only	40% non-credit only
Medium Usage (1.7-3.5/year)	25% credit only	15% credit only	18% non-credit only
High Usage (3.6+/year)	44% credit only	9% credit only	6% non-credit only
No response	15%	44%	36%

Findings indicate that there are different participation patterns for non-credit, credit degree and credit non-degree students and very little cross-over from non-credit to credit. The total population exhibited a high degree of institutional loyalty, with credit non-degree students being the most likely to study from more than one institution. Credit degree students were the most active participants over time and non-credit and credit non-degree students showed similar patterns with the highest percentages being low participants.

Implications

Non-credit, credit degree and credit non-degree students appear to differ from each other in participation patterns. The assumption that the non-credit population has great potential for being transformed into credit students is suspect, and the belief in a trajectory that potential credit students will first enroll in non-credit courses appears to be unfounded.

Because of markedly higher participation rates and institutional loyalty, credit degree students hold the most promise for significant increases in institutional enrollments. Potential degree students are most likely to enroll first in credit courses and to enroll in degree programs from the institution where they took their first credit continuing education courses. Institutions courting this population, then, would be well advised to promote credit courses which are integrally related to degree programs which are attractive and accessible to adults. Such degree programs should be marketed as complete entities, thus serving to attract degree-oriented adult students. Every attempt should be made to matriculate adult students rapidly, as credit non-degree students appear to be the most unpredictable of the user groups.

Even though this sample showed little cross-over from non-credit to credit participation, the similarities in motivation between the non-credit and credit degree students in all areas except hobby/recreation indicates the potential for that cross-over to be cultivated. Consciously developed curricular linkages between non-credit courses and degree programs and creative marketing strategies to stimulate desire for career advancement (a motivation noticeably lower for

non-credit users than credit degree students) could create the bridge which is currently lacking.

Credit non-degree students appear to be highly pragmatic, driven by relatively short-term, job-oriented goals. The sporadic participation patterns of this group of students very probably represent a consumer orientation--they will go wherever they need to go to get the specific courses required. Institutions with curricula which relate to certification and relicensure requirements for various occupational groups should package such courses as programs which are specifically tied to the certification requirements. Such programs should then be visibly and consistently marketed to attract this clientele over the long term. Even though eventual matriculation ought not to be anticipated by the institution, more regular and loyal participation patterns could conceivably result from satisfied customers returning to have new needs met.

Further research into participation patterns of adult learners is certainly needed to further delineate the similarities and differences among these three groups. This preliminary study has focused on seeking data which will facilitate institutional decision-making concerning the possibility of successfully cultivating non-credit course students as a potential credit course market.

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